

Innocence and Experience: The Subversion of the Child Hero Archetype in Philip Pullman's Speculative Soteriology

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This paper will discuss the works of two children's fantasy fiction authors – Philip Pullman and Madeleine L'Engle. Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, consists of *Northern Lights* (NL¹), *The Subtle Knife* (TSK²) and *The Amber Spyglass* (TAS³). L'Engle's trilogy comprises *A Wrinkle in Time* (WIT⁴), *A Wind in the Door* (WITD⁵) and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (STP⁶). Both trilogies are largely spiritual in theme, concentrating on explorations of the problem of evil through the medium of speculative fiction.⁷ Strong parallels between the two series exist in their exploration of the interface between science and religion, and in their rejection of institutionalised religion. L'Engle's trilogy, however, is explored primarily as representing a paradigmatic treatment of the archetype of the Child Hero, in contrast to Pullman's radical departure from this convention of children's fantasy fiction which is a deliberate part of his speculative soteriology.

The two authors combine elements of science fiction (discussions of quantum mechanics in *His Dark Materials*, and dark matter, string theory and genetics in Madeleine L'Engle's works) and fantasy, in the form of a range of mythological and supernatural beings, for whose existence no specifically scientific rationale is put forward. These elements are specifically chosen in order to explore a range of spiritual and religious issues, placing the works firmly in the sub-genre of 'applied fantasy,' that is, works that apply fantastic devices toward social or philosophical ends.⁸

¹ Philip Pullman: *Northern Lights*, London, 1998.

² Philip Pullman: *The Subtle Knife*, London, 1998.

³ Philip Pullman: *The Amber Spyglass*, London, 2001.

⁴ Madeleine L'Engle: *A Wrinkle in Time*, USA, 1984.

⁵ Madeleine L'Engle: *A Wind in the Door*, UK, 1988.

⁶ Madeleine L'Engle: *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, New York, 1979.

⁷ For the purposes of this paper, the term 'speculative fiction' draws from Davenport's argument that speculative science fiction is differentiated from 'scientific' science fiction in its focus on social extrapolation. See Gary K Wolfe: *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy, A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship*, New York, 1986.

⁸ Roger C Scholbin: *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, Notre Dame, 1982.

At this point, the question of a definition of 'children's fiction' as a type of literature must be raised. As Sale points out, it is the only literary category defined by its audience and is, as a result, somewhat problematic.⁹ Although the books discussed are marketed to children and young adults, neither author describes themselves as an author of children's fiction. Indeed, both authors explicitly state in interviews that they had no particular age group in mind. The 'children's fiction' label then, appears to be primarily one affixed by the marketing arm of publishing houses and both series have found a large readership outside the publishers' target audience.

In presenting a definition of children's fantasy fiction, it has been argued that the location of both evil and the hope of salvation in settings beyond mundane existence serves as an escape from the complexities of mundane existence into a world in which children are able to achieve victory over the named and embodied fears which beset them namelessly and without form in real life.¹⁰ This is a somewhat inadequate evaluation of the use of secondary sub-creations which explains only possible reasons for the appeal of speculative fiction works featuring child protagonists to the child reader. L'Engle and Pullman's novels contain layers of thematic complexity which defy such oversimplification. The authors discussed in this paper specifically choose child protagonists, in combination with a range of other devices, in order to construct a kind of literary *gedankenexperiment*.¹¹ Both trilogies represent what Schlobin has termed 'applied fantasy'.¹²

There are strong parallels between the concerns explored through the medium of science fiction in both trilogies. As works of speculative fiction, the books discussed rely on a number of secondary worlds for their setting. Both authors establish a series of sub-creations as narrative thought experiments; settings in which to make solid abstract explorations of the problem of evil. The child

⁹ Roger Sale: 'The Audience in Children's Literature' in George E Slusser et al, editors, *Bridges to Fantasy*, USA, 1982, 77.

¹⁰ Kath Filmer-Davies: *Scepticism and Hope in Twentieth Century Fantasy Literature*, Ohio, 1992, 108.

¹¹ Originally pertaining to thought experiments, primarily in the field of physics, Thomas M Scortia argued that '[t]he science fiction writer is in the truest sense of professional fabricator of *gedankenexperimenten*.' See Wolfe, op cit.

¹² Schlobin, op cit.

heroes occupy a precarious position within these multiple worlds. While they are allowed glimpses of utopian existences, they are also imperiled in less benevolent places. Mrs Coulter's vision of a world where children are detached and Camazotz in *A Wrinkle in Time* draw heavily upon the western tradition of dystopian fiction. The common concern uniting seminal works in the genre such as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, with the works under discussion, is that of the question of individual freedom. Hume characterises the assertion of individual freedom as the basis for true human experience, even if it comes at the cost of permanent contentment for the majority of the people, as the defining characteristic of dystopian fiction.¹³

Mrs Coulter explains to Lyra that:

All that happens is a little cut, and then everything's peaceful. For ever. You see your daemons a wonderful friend when you're young, but at the age we call puberty ... daemons bring all sorts of troublesome thoughts and feelings and that's what lets Dust in.¹⁴

The image of Lyra's Pantalaimon cut away and reduced to a trotting pet, taking with it her soul drives fury into the girl. The reader is given a sense of the emotionless, dulled world in the description of the adults at the Experimental Station, a description which resonates with the descriptions of Camazotz in *A Wrinkle in Time*. Here, too, conformity and detachment from all emotions are presented as a diabolical solution to the existence of suffering.

IT offers, and then attempts to force, Charles Wallace, Margaret and Calvin to subsume their identities into that of IT:

'You see,' IT says 'what you will soon realise is that there is no need to fight me ... For why should you wish to fight someone who is here only to save you from pain and trouble? For you, as well as for the rest of all the happy, useful people on this planet, in my own strength, am willing to assume all the pain, all the burdens, all the responsibility of thought and decision.'¹⁵

¹³ Kathryn Hume: *Fantasy and Mimesis; Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, New York, 1984, 111.

¹⁴ *NL*, 284-5.

¹⁵ *WIT*, 106.

My particular interest, in light of this, is in the symbolic role played by child heroes for adult readers. In the context of these two series, the child heroes act as a link between the secular, world of the Western adult, and a yearned for return to some sense of spiritual experience. It is a symbolic use of the figure of the child that has been a central feature of fantasy fiction throughout the twentieth century. C S Lewis' belief that adulthood brings with it a fading of that piece of heavenly glory which is brought into the world at birth underlies his Narnian Chronicles.¹⁶ It is this idealisation of childhood as a time of paradisaal innocence¹⁷ which is deliberately subverted by Pullman in *His Dark Materials*. Pullman utilises the symbolic resonances of the archetypal figure of The Child and then confounds the reader's expectations by placing the moment of salvation, the moment of Paradise Regained, in the instance of Will and Lyra's entry into adulthood and sexual maturation.¹⁸

Pullman's trilogy has been described as profoundly atheistic, largely as a result of the episode in *The Amber Spyglass* in which Will and Lyra release the Authority of Heaven, who, upon reaching open air, dissolves and vanishes; an act that has been interpreted as the killing of God. Consequently, the author has been characterised as a sort of Nietzschean scourge upon children's literature, attracting the ire of conservative Christian commentators. While the trilogy may be atheistic in the strict sense of the word, and are certainly deeply critical of institutionalised religion, they are deeply spiritual works that speak of a belief (whether fictive or not) in a Divine force, however nebulous and incomprehensible this concept may be.

Pullman's criticism is of the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular and the Church of Lyra's world is a vivid caricature of the more decadent aspects of Roman Catholicism combined with Puritanical ethical mores. It is a vision of an alternate history in which England is controlled by authoritarian Church councils.¹⁹ The author's criticism is derived from his belief that:

¹⁶ Filmer-Davies, op cit, 111.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ '[Will and Lyra were] the true image of what human beings could be, once they had come into their inheritance...children-no-longer children, saturated with love.' TAS, 497.

¹⁹ Millicent Lenz: 'Phillip Pullman' in Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz, editors *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, London, 2001.

Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept [this deity.] Wherever you look in history you find that. Its still going on.²⁰

This damning critique of monotheisms is based in a profoundly orientalist worldview. Mary Malone, the ex-nun turned research scientist can be seen as representing an ideal toward which the west should turn in its search for the truth. She embodies both rationalism, and a return to intuitive spirituality shown in her fascination with both quantum mechanics and the I-Ching. Despite her study of these two areas, Mary is unable to attain spiritual completion – the mysteries of both the I-Ching and the particles she is studying remain hidden from her. It is Lyra who intuitively reaches for and uncovers the meaning which unites the two, linking both to Dust and the alethiometer of her own world. It is only a child, whose nature is seen as possessing a natural ability to connect with deeper truths, who can unravel these questions which are beyond even the grasp of an enlightened adult such as Mary.

The I-Ching is quite deliberately chosen by the author. It represents the Other, the spiritual east in contrast to the rationalist West. The figure of the child then, is something of a chameleon. The Other within our midst. This is true even more so of Lyra who enters this world from a world familiar yet at the same time utterly foreign. If these Otherworlds represent alternative spiritual truths, the child acts as a link to these Otherworlds. There is a certain level of Orientalism in Pullman's appropriation of the I-Ching. Where the control of science by the Christian Church in Lyra's world corrupts knowledge and stifles lines of enquiry, the I-Ching is characterised as being a neutral belief system, in harmony with science. Rather than demonstrating an accurate reflection of a non-Western belief system, Pullman uses the I-Ching as a *tabula rasa* upon which the unfulfilled spiritual desires of the West are written.

This particular episode involving the I-Ching and Mary Malone's particle physics research has strong parallels with Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wind in the Door*. As Charles Wallace sickens, his sister Margaret searches desperately for the cause of his illness. Aided by

²⁰ Phillip Pullman, Interview with Huw Spinner, 'Third Way Magazine' <http://www.thirdway.org.uk/past/showpage.asp?page=3949>, 13th February 2003.

the cherubim Proginoskes, Margaret is able to recall in detail a memory buried in her subconscious. She remembers the mathematical problems that her father was working on. Written on the tablecloth she is able to discern the Greek letters that spell out the beginning of the word Ecthroi²¹ – the Ecthroi being the malevolent, anti-matter beings against which Margaret, Charles-Wallace and Calvin are fighting and which threaten to engulf the entire universe in darkness. Once again, it is a child who possesses an innate, intuitive grasp of a deeper spiritual truth that is just out of reach of an adult, even one with all the powers of advanced scientific rationalism.

Mr Murray, Margaret's father recognises the limitations of scientific knowledge. He says to his wife:

You and I have good enough minds to know how very limited and finite they are. The naked intellect is an extraordinarily inaccurate instrument.²²

This is a recognition that is echoed in Mary Malone's admission to Lyra that:

Everything about this is *embarrassing*. Do you know how embarrassing it is to mention good and evil in a scientific laboratory? One of the reasons I became a research scientist was so I didn't have to think about that kind of thing.²³

Margaret is able to clearly recall her father's mathematics through a process called 'kything'; an empathetic form of telepathy that is a recurring motif throughout the series. Again, the parallels to Pullman's narrative and Lyra's use of the althiometer are striking.

Lyra astonishes Father Coram with her use of the alethiometer, a device which ordinarily takes years of study to master. The idea of the child possessing a connection to primitive powers that are closed off to adults is a common one in the fantasy genre. Margaret's ability to kythe is likewise attributed to her youth. Childhood, here, symbolises an earlier, mythical state of human existence; one that is represented by an effortless connection to the Divine which has become lost as humanity has progressed. The child hero, then,

²¹ *WITD*, 88.

²² *Ibid*, 87.

²³ *TSK*, 100.

embodies a sense of now absent spirituality, just as the past appears to be an age of greater faith.

Madeleine L'Engle engages in a similar appropriation of non-Western religions. Where Pullman idealises Eastern spirituality, L'Engle, in *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, juxtaposes the most extreme, oppressive elements of Christianity, in the form of the paranoid witch-hunts of white settlers, with Native American beliefs and culture, which is characterised as preserving the natural balance, both spiritual and environmental of the planet.

Although Lyra and Charles Wallace are both born into western, Christian worlds, both become linked to these alternate spiritualities through the course of the narrative. They stand on the boundary with the Other, acting out the desire to access ways of life which are perceived to be more spiritually enlightened, while ultimately remaining within their own worlds. Yet, as we will see, this Pullman quite deliberately sets the Child Hero up in such a way as to reflect the traditional symbolism of the child representing a prelapsarian state of nature, only to undermine this idealisation of innocence.

Imaginative literature has been analysed as reflecting people's longing for the lost paradise and the restoration of the Garden. Certainly the overall narrative arches of the two series play out this desire, but the respective authors' numerous sub-creations act as the embodiment of a series of utopias and dystopias, not only the ideal of the Garden of Eden.²⁴

Both series contain an Eden-like secondary world. For Pullman it is the world of the Mulefa, creatures who, in Pullman's words, embody harmony with the environment. L'Engle's Eden is the world that Margaret's father tesser to when he pulls her away from the Camazotz the planet behind the Black Thing.

²⁴ This technique is described, in part, by Hume who offers a rather narrow definition of 'contrastive worlds' as refining the complexity of reality down to two centres of interest, thus creating a tension between the two which allows the author to comment upon reality. Hume, op cit, 83. By broadening this definition to include multiple contrastive sub-creations it becomes a useful tool for analysis. The contrastive effect is emphasised by both authors in the use of this world, in addition to a number of sub-creations, all of which serve a particular, didactic purpose.

The creatures who inhabit this world, like the Mulefa, represent an ideal state of living. Aunt Beast, a creature from this Eden substitute, tells Margaret:

We do not know what things *look* like, as you say, we *know* what things *are* like. It must be a very limiting thing this seeing.²⁵

The two secondary worlds are symbolic of the prelapsarian state toward which humanity yearns. Yet, interestingly, in neither series is this state truly attained. When Lyra and Will free the dead from their enslavement in the Sheol-like underworld, they are allowed a glimpse of the land of the Mulefa, their last conscious experience. Lyra explains before she frees them, consulting the alethiometer:

When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just like your daemons did... You'll drift apart, it's true, but you'll be out in the open part of everything alive again.²⁶

Eden, then, is not promised at the end. For Pullman, the book depicts the Temptation and Fall not as the source of death and sin, as in traditional Christian teaching, but as the beginning of true human freedom; something to be celebrated, not lamented. The Tempter, in the figure of Mary Malone, is not evil, but the catalyst for salvation, not just of humanity but of the entire universe.

Central to Pullman's trilogy is the author's appropriation and subversion of the traditional Christian account of the Fall. He draws from a range of sources in order to explore this idea, the major ones being the works of William Blake and a short essay by Heinrich von Kleist entitled *On the Marionette Theatre*. Lenz identifies William Blake's belief that the soul must pass through the fallen world in order to achieve innocence.²⁷ This interpretation of salvation is echoed by von Kleist when he concludes that, 'We must eat again of the Tree of Knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence.'²⁸ However, while both of these interpretations of salvation were pivotal to

²⁵ *WIT*, 158.

²⁶ *TAS*, 335.

²⁷ Lenz, op cit.

²⁸ Heinrich von Kleist: 'On the Marionette Theatre' translated by Idris Parry in Nicholas Tucker: *Darkness Visible: Inside the World of Philip Pullman*, Cambridge, 2003, 207.

Pullman's writing, they do not, as Lenz suggests, underlie the final picture of salvation which Pullman presents.²⁹ Pullman explains that:

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the temptation of the serpent is for me the central myth of what it means to be a human being. So it was clear to me from the beginning that this was what His Dark Materials would have to be about as well. It would have to *lead up* to a garden in which something similar took place, or something analogous, anyway.³⁰

Pullman starts from the notion of the necessity of the Fall in salvation but takes this idea further than either von Kleist or Blake. Will and Lyra's moment of awakening is not a return to any higher form of innocence at all. This much is made entirely clear by an exchange between Lyra and the angel, Xaphania, after Lyra discovers that she can no longer read the althiometer after her transition into adulthood. Xaphania explains:

You read it by grace and you can regain it by work...your reading will be better than ever then, after a lifetime of thought and effort, because it will come from conscious understanding.³¹

This is the moment at which the purpose behind Pullman's use of the figure of the Child Hero becomes apparent. Pullman's works do not yearn toward a higher form of innocence: rather, his works present the view that loss of innocence is that which makes us fully human.

The contrast between the ultimate outcomes of the two novels, both of which are in other respects remarkable similar, demonstrates the extent to which Pullman subverts the idealisation of innocence and childhood in order to present a speculative vision of humanity's salvation. Both deal with the question of human nature and emphasise the importance of individual freedom, criticising authoritarianism and its ability to destroy humanity through the subjugation of the individual. In contrast to L'Engle's works, however, Pullman's subversion of the Child Hero reveals a concern with deeply embedded social structures, promoted in seminal works of Christian

²⁹ Lenz, op cit.

³⁰ 'Darkness Visible: An Interview with Philip Pullman,' www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/94589/104-25167361314532 Part II.

³¹ TAS, 520.

literature such as *Paradise Lost*. He locates the denigration of human nature not merely in institutions that wield authoritarian control, though the Church is certainly heavily criticised for this reason, but on these institutions' promotion of a body/soul dichotomy which underlies the Western archetype of the Child Hero as metaphor for paradisaal innocence.³²

³² Demonstrated in the idea that the separation of body and soul constitutes a 'psychic death,' a descent from 'human being' to 'non-being' (see Anne-Marie Bird: '*Without Contraries is no Progression:*' *Dust as an All-Inclusive, Multifunctional Metaphor in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials*, in *Children's Literature in Education*, Volume 32, No. 2, 2001, 117. Dramaticised in the intercision of children from their daemons at Bolvanger in *Northern Lights*).